



1951 Waterfront dispute lasts 151 days

Story: Strikes and labour disputes

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(Derby, 2012b)

Cold War conflict

After the Second World War, booming economic conditions and a shortage of skilled labour encouraged unions to press for better conditions for their members. High inflation was making life hard for workers and their families, so the government's policy of resisting wage increases was fiercely opposed by strong unions. However, the Cold War atmosphere meant that this militant union activity was regarded with hostility, even by the Labour government. In 1948 a go-slow by Auckland carpenters gained higher rates of pay, but another go-slow in 1949 resulted in a lockout. Within days all building work in the Auckland area came to a standstill. The government backed the employers and refused social security benefits to the locked-out carpenters. The Federation of Labour supported the government, the union was deregistered and its militant leadership discredited.

During the 1949 election campaign the National Party promised to limit militant unionism, and won power. The new government was on a collision course with the watersiders, the most radical union in the country. In 1950 the 'wharfies', headed by the uncompromising Jock Barnes, led a walkout of militant unions from the Federation of Labour. They set up a rival Trade Union Congress which opposed the arbitration system.

The 151-day dispute

In February 1951 the wharfies began the most expensive industrial dispute in New Zealand history. They had already negotiated a 6% wage increase with their employers. When the Arbitration Court then issued a general wage increase of 15%, the ship owners offered to pay watersiders only the 9% difference rather than a full additional 15%. In protest, the wharfies stopped working overtime. Their employers ordered them to work the extra hours, and no longer hired them when they refused. The union regarded the dispute as a lockout by employers, but the ship owners insisted that the refusal to work overtime was an illegal strike.



Locked-out carpenters, 1949



Waterside Workers' Union walkout, 1950



Illegal pamphlet, 1951 waterfront dispute (1st of 3)

War on women

Women and children felt some of the worst effects of the emergency regulations introduced during the 1951 waterfront dispute. Labour MP Mabel Howard called the dispute 'a war on women',¹ because the wives of strikers had to survive with no income, and it was illegal for anyone to help them. The regulations applied to children too. In Wellington's Clifton Terrace primary school, strikers' children were separated from other pupils during playtime in case they illegally shared their lunches.

The government issued drastic emergency regulations, giving it the power to seize union funds, use the armed forces to replace strikers, and prohibit strike meetings or publications. Supporters of the wharfies were even forbidden to write favourably about the strike or give food to strikers' children. Other unions came out on strike in protest at these regulations. Soon 22,000 watersiders, freezing workers, miners, hydro-electricity workers and

drivers had stopped work.

For 151 days parts of the country were under siege. Navy seamen were used to move coal from remote West Coast mines to the port of Westport. Protest marches in the main centres were violently broken up by police. The watersiders concealed printing presses in their houses and distributed hundreds of thousands of illegal pamphlets telling their side of the story. However the government stood firm. By the time the dispute was called off, more than a million working days had been lost. The New Zealand Waterside Workers' Union was forced to split into small unions for each port. Most of its leaders, including Jock Barnes, could not go back to their old jobs on the waterfront.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Bert Roth and Janny Hammond, *Toil and trouble: the struggle for a better life in New Zealand*. Auckland: Methuen New Zealand, 1981, p. 158.

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